
Intuition, Thought Experiments, and the A Priori

There has been a significant shift in the discussion of a priori knowledge. The shift is due largely to the influence of Quine. The traditional debate focused on the epistemic status of mathematics and logic. Kant, for example, maintained that arithmetic and geometry provide clear examples of synthetic a priori knowledge and that principles of logic, such as the principle of contradiction, provide the basis for analytic a priori knowledge. Quine's rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction and his holistic empiricist account of mathematic and logical knowledge undercut the traditional defenses of the a priori in two ways. First, one could no longer defend the view that mathematical and logical knowledge is a priori solely by rejecting Mill's inductive empiricism. Moreover, holistic empiricism proved to be a more challenging position to refute than inductive empiricism. Second, the rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction blocked an alternative defense of the a priori status of mathematics and logic that appealed to their alleged analyticity.

The new debate focuses on the implications of empiricism for the practice of philosophy itself. Rather than arguing that empiricism cannot accommodate mathematical or logical knowledge, contemporary proponents of the a priori contend that it cannot accommodate philosophical theorizing. For example, Laurence Bonjour (1998) maintains that either empiricism is false or skepticism

about the external world is true.¹ Hence, empiricism cannot provide a plausible philosophical account of knowledge of the external world. George Bealer (1992) and Frank Jackson (1998) focus on the role of intuition in conceptual analysis. Jackson argues that serious metaphysics requires conceptual analysis. Hence, empiricism fails to accommodate metaphysical knowledge. Bealer maintains that empiricists rely on intuition when constructing their own epistemological theories. Hence, empiricism fails to deliver an epistemological theory that underwrites its epistemological practice.

My purpose in this paper is to examine the role of intuition in conceptual analysis and to assess whether that role can be parlayed into a plausible defense of a priori knowledge. The focus of my investigation will be Bealer's attempt to provide such a defense. In section 1, I clarify the parameters of the debate between Bealer and his empiricist rivals, present his account of intuition and its evidential status, and argue that the account faces three problems. Sections 2 and 4 examine the two primary arguments that Bealer offers against empiricism: the Starting Points Argument and the Argument from Epistemic Norms. In section 2, I argue that the Starting Points Argument fails because Bealer fails to show that intuitions are a priori evidence. Section 3 examines Hilary Kornblith's (2002) response to the Starting Points Argument and contends that it is inconclusive. In section 4, I argue that the Argument from Epistemic Norms fails because it is open to the Stalemate Problem. Section 5 offers an alternative approach to defending the a priori status of intuitions that avoids the Stalemate Problem. The alternative approach highlights the role of empirical investigation in defending the a priori.

1

Bealer's (99) goal is to reject the principle of empiricism: "A person's experiences and/or observations comprise the person's *prima facie* evidence."² His strategy for doing so is to defend the evidential status of intuitions. His defense takes place within the context of what he calls the "Standard Justificatory Procedure" (SJP): "the procedure we standardly use to justify our beliefs and theories" (100). He maintains that the SJP counts not only experiences, observations, memory, and testimony as *prima facie* evidence but also intuitions. In support of the latter contention, Bealer invites us to consider one of the counterexamples that provide our evidence that the justified true belief analysis of the concept of knowledge is wrong:

1. For a discussion of Bonjour's argument, see Casullo (2003), Beebe (2008), and Thurow (2009).

2. All page references in the text are to Bealer (1992) unless otherwise indicated.

We find it intuitively obvious that there could be a situation like that described and in such a situation the person would not know that there is a sheep in the pasture despite having a justified true belief. This intuition...and other intuitions like it are our evidence that the traditional theory is mistaken. (100)

Although the SJP includes intuitions as *prima facie* evidence, it does not follow automatically that the SJP is incompatible with empiricism. The SJP, according to Bealer (101), includes a mechanism of self-criticism that “permits one to challenge the legitimacy of any standing source of *prima facie* evidence.” If that mechanism eliminates intuition as a source of *prima facie* evidence, then the SJP is compatible with empiricism.

Before turning to Bealer’s account of intuition and his arguments against empiricism, some points of clarification are necessary. First, Bealer’s description of the counterexample that provides our evidence against the justified true belief analysis of the concept of knowledge suggests that it involves only a single intuition. There are, however, two distinct types of intuition involved: (1) a *modal* intuition that the state of affairs described in the counterexample is possible, and (2) a *classificatory* intuition that the state of affairs described in the counterexample is not a case of knowledge. My focus is on the latter.³ Second, his description of the evidence that the counterexample provides is not, at least on one straightforward reading, incompatible with empiricism. The fact that we find certain things *obvious* is not incompatible with empiricism. Moreover, the fact that we find certain things *intuitively obvious* is not incompatible with empiricism if all that means is that we find certain things obvious immediately without the need for conscious reasoning. Consequently, the parameters of the debate between Bealer and empiricism need to be sharpened.

As Bealer sets up the debate, empiricism is at odds with the SJP apart from any considerations about the evidential status of intuitions. The principle of empiricism maintains that only a person’s experiences and/or observations comprise the person’s *prima facie* evidence. The SJP, according to Bealer (101), also counts memory and testimony as *prima facie* evidence. Bealer (128 n. 1) maintains that if memory and testimony are added to empiricism’s list of legitimate sources of *prima facie* evidence, his arguments will not be impacted. Why can’t intuition also be added to that list? Presumably, because Bealer takes intuition to be a source of *a priori* evidence and he takes empiricism to maintain that no evidence or justification is *a priori*. But, if this is the case, then in order to assess the evidential status of intuitions, we need two further pieces of information.

3. Modal intuitions and modal knowledge raise a distinct set of issues. For a discussion of these issues, see Hill (2006), Williamson (2007), Casullo (2012a), and chapters 12 and 13 here.

The first is a characterization of a priori evidence or justification. There are two prominent accounts of a priori justification on the contemporary scene. Each offers a different characterization of the central idea that such justification is independent of experience:

- (AP1) S's belief that p is justified a priori iff S's belief that p is nonexperientially justified (i.e., justified by a nonexperiential source).⁴
- (AP2) S's belief that p is justified a priori iff S's belief that p is nonexperientially justified and that justification cannot be defeated by experience.⁵

For purposes of this paper, I will assume (AP1). Nothing in the paper turns on that choice.

The second is a characterization of the concept of *experience* that is constitutive of both (AP1) and (AP2). There are three relevant senses of the term "experience." The first, or narrow, sense includes only the experience of the five senses. The second, or broad, sense includes any conscious occurrent state, including one's sense experiences and intuitions. Most proponents of the a priori, including Bealer, think that the sense of "experience" involved in (AP1) and (AP2) is broader than the narrow sense but narrower than the broad sense. They think that this intermediate sense includes, in addition to the experience of the five senses, at least some of the following: the deliverances of introspection, memory, or testimony. Any complete articulation of the concept of a priori justification must include a characterization of this intermediate sense of experience.⁶ For purposes of this paper, I will assume that the intermediate sense of "experience" includes the deliverances of introspection, memory, and testimony. Once again, nothing in the essay turns on that assumption.

We can now articulate more precisely the central point of dispute between Bealer and empiricism. Empiricism maintains that all evidence or justification is experiential. Bealer's central claim is that the classificatory intuitions involved in thought experiments constitute nonexperiential evidence. To sustain this claim, he must show (a) that classificatory intuitions are evidence, and (b) that they are nonexperiential. To assess whether he has done so, we need to clarify his account of intuition and its evidential status.

Intuitions are not beliefs, judgments, guesses, hunches, or common sense. Instead, according to Bealer:

4. See Casullo (2003) and Casullo (2009) for an articulation and defense of (AP1).

5. See Kitcher (1983) and Kitcher (2000) for an articulation and defense of (AP2).

6. In Casullo (2003), I argue that attempts to characterize the intermediate sense of experience by a priori conceptual analysis fail and suggest that it is a natural kind term, whose extension is to be determined by empirical investigation.

When you have an intuition that A, it *seems* to you that A. Here ‘seems’ is understood, not in its use as a cautionary or ‘hedging’ term, but in its use as a term for a genuine kind of conscious episode. (101)

Bealer, however, distinguishes between two types of intuition: a priori and physical. We have an intuition that when a house is undermined, it will fall. But, according to Bealer (102), it is not an a priori intuition, “for it does not present itself as necessary.” On the other hand, Bealer (102) maintains that “when we have an a priori intuition, say, that if p then not not p, this presents itself as necessary: it does not seem to us that things could be otherwise.” Bealer makes two further claims about the evidential status of intuitions. First, intuitions are fallible; they can be mistaken. Second, “the standard justificatory procedure directs us to give greatest evidential weight to intuitions about specific concrete cases... ‘theoretical’ intuitions have relatively less evidential weight” (104). Bealer, however, is not explicit about what counts as a theoretical intuition.

Bealer’s account of intuition and its evidential status faces three objections. The first is methodological. Bealer attempts to establish that intuitions are a priori evidence solely on the basis of phenomenological considerations. According to Bealer, not all intuitions are a priori. There are also physical intuitions. Bealer marks the distinction between a priori and physical intuitions solely on the basis of phenomenological differences. The former present themselves as necessary; the latter do not. But if an a priori intuition that A is a priori evidence that A and a physical intuition that A is a posteriori evidence that A, then it must be the case that the former derives from a nonexperiential source but the latter does not. Bealer’s account, however, leaves unexplained how the phenomenological difference between a priori and physical intuitions is sufficient to show that they derive from different sources. If the physical intuition that when a house is undermined it will fall derives from an experiential source, the underlying cognitive process that produces it involves experience. By contrast, if the intuition that some Gettier case is not a case of knowledge derives from a nonexperiential source, the underlying cognitive process that produces it does not involve experience. The phenomenology of a cognitive state alone cannot reveal such differences in the underlying cognitive process that produces it. Empirical investigation is necessary in order to identify the cognitive process that produces a cognitive state such as intuition and to determine whether it involves experience.

Empirical investigation is also relevant in a second way. Bealer introduces a number of different types of intuition: classificatory, modal, logical, set-theoretic, mathematical, and conceptual. Even if they all present themselves as necessary, it does not follow that the cognitive processes that produce them are all of the same type. It is an open question whether the cognitive process that produces, for example, classificatory intuitions is the same as the process that produces modal

intuitions. Moreover, it is a question that cannot be answered without empirical investigation. No amount of reflection on the phenomenological similarities and differences between classificatory and modal intuitions can reveal whether they are produced by the same or different cognitive processes. The question whether they are produced by the same or different cognitive processes, however, is central to their epistemic assessment. For example, if the cognitive process that produces modal intuitions is different from the cognitive process that produces classificatory intuitions, then one cannot conclude that the latter is nonexperiential from the fact that the former is nonexperiential.

The second objection is theoretical. For Bealer, a priori intuitions are essentially modal. An a priori intuition that A presents itself as necessary. If A presents itself to S as necessary, then it seems to S that necessarily A. So, S has an a priori intuition that A if and only if it seems to S that necessarily A. The modal character of a priori intuitions raises two questions for Bealer's account. First, can it provide a plausible account of the relationship between knowledge of the truth value and knowledge of the general modal status of a proposition? Second, is it compatible with his contention that a priori intuition is fallible?

In order to fix ideas, let us introduce some distinctions:

- (A) S knows the *truth value* of p just in case S knows that p is true or S knows that p is false.
- (B) S knows the *general modal status* of p just in case S knows that p is a necessary proposition (i.e., necessarily true or necessarily false) or S knows that p is a contingent proposition (i.e., contingently true or contingently false).
- (C) S knows the *specific modal status* of p just in case S knows that p is necessarily true or S knows that p is necessarily false or S knows that p is contingently true or S knows that p is contingently false.

(A) and (B) are logically independent: one can know one but not the other. One can know that the Goldbach Conjecture is either necessarily true or necessarily false but not know whether it is true or false. Similarly, one can know that the Pythagorean Theorem is true, but not know whether it is necessarily true or contingently true. The specific modal status of a proposition, however, is the conjunction of its truth value and its general modal status. Therefore, one cannot know the specific modal status of a proposition unless one knows both its truth value and its general modal status.

Since knowledge of the general modal status of a proposition and knowledge of its truth value are independent of one another, the source of one's justification for the former need not be the same as the source of one's justification for the latter. Kripke's (1971) treatment of necessary a posteriori propositions provides a compelling illustration. If we consider a proposition of the form "Fa," where "a"

rigidly designates some contingent object and “F” stands for some essential property of that object, Kripke maintains that our knowledge that necessarily Fa is based on our a posteriori knowledge that Fa and our a priori knowledge that if Fa then necessarily Fa. If we consider an analogous example from the a priori domain, such as that necessarily two is even, and concede that all a priori knowledge is ultimately based on intuition, it is an open question whether a similar *dual source* model applies. On such a model, one’s knowledge that two is even is based on a mathematical intuition, one’s knowledge that if two is even then necessarily two is even is based on a different modal intuition, and the two intuitions are produced by different cognitive processes.

Bealer is faced with a dilemma when articulating the relationship between knowledge of the truth value and knowledge of the general modal status of a proposition. Suppose that S has an a priori intuition that A—that is, suppose that it seems to S that necessarily A. Does the a priori intuition that A provide S with evidence that A is true or that A is necessarily true? If an a priori intuition that A provides evidence that A is necessarily true, then Bealer’s account rules out the possibility of having a priori knowledge of the truth value of A without having a priori knowledge of the general modal status of A.⁷ All a priori knowledge that A is true is based on inference from a priori knowledge that A is necessarily true. But this conflicts with the fact that many mathematicians have a priori knowledge that mathematical propositions are true but lack knowledge of their general modal status. On the other hand, if an a priori intuition that A provides evidence that A is true but not that it is necessarily true, then Bealer’s account of modal knowledge is strained. Proponents of the a priori, including Bealer, typically maintain that one can know a priori modal propositions, such as that necessarily $2 + 1 = 3$. But if S’s a priori intuition that A—that is, if it seems to S that necessarily A—provides evidence for only the truth of A, then in order to know a priori that necessarily A, S must have an a priori intuition that necessarily A: that is, it must seem to A that necessarily, necessarily A. But Bealer has not shown that there are such iterated modal intuitions.

The modal character of a priori intuitions also conflicts with their alleged fallibility. Since Bealer maintains that there is a priori knowledge of both the truth value and the general modal status of a proposition, there are two forms of fallibilism with respect to the a priori:

(F1) Fallibilism with respect to the truth value of a proposition;

and

(F2) Fallibilism with respect to the general modal status of a proposition.

7. Here I assume that intuition is the only source of a priori knowledge.

Bealer allows that his intuition regarding the naive comprehension axiom is mistaken; the axiom is false despite seeming true. His intuition is fallible with respect to the truth value of a proposition. His account, however, precludes a form of fallibilism with respect to the general modal status of a proposition. Mistake regarding the general modal status of a proposition can occur in two ways: (1) if some contingent truth, say C, were to seem necessary to someone, or (2) if some necessary truth, say N, were to seem contingent to someone. Bealer's account can accommodate the first but not the second. On his account, if N does not seem to be necessarily true then it is not an a priori intuition. Hence, one cannot have a mistaken a priori intuition that some necessary truth is a contingent truth.

The third objection is expository. It draws attention to a critical lacuna in Bealer's account of a priori knowledge. Bealer, following BonJour (1998), describes his account as a version of moderate rationalism. There are, however, two different ways of developing moderate rationalism. BonJour offers a version of *traditional* moderate rationalism. According to traditional moderate rationalism, intuition is a source of basic a priori knowledge of general principles such as " $3 + 2 = 5$ " and "Nothing can be both red and green all over." According to BonJour, the fact that intuition, unlike experience, can directly justify *general* principles to a degree sufficient for knowledge allows moderate rationalism to avoid the skeptical consequences of empiricism.

Bealer, however, maintains that specific concrete case intuitions have greatest evidential weight; theoretical intuitions have less evidential weight. Bealer does not articulate what he means by a "theoretical" intuition, but the contrast with specific concrete case intuitions suggests that theoretical intuitions are *general*: they are intuitions that some general principle is true. In the case of conceptual analysis, he maintains that our knowledge of the general principles that constitute the analysis of a concept is based on an abductive inference from specific concrete case intuitions. If this model of knowledge of general principles extends to the domains of logic, mathematics, and set theory, then our knowledge of general logical, mathematical, and set-theoretic principles is based on abductive inference from specific concrete case intuitions. This version of moderate rationalism, call it *modern* moderate rationalism, is different from traditional moderate rationalism since it gives less evidential weight to general intuitions. General intuitions do not directly justify general principles to a degree sufficient for knowledge.

Bealer does not explicitly address the evidential status of general intuitions. He maintains that he has an intuition that the naive comprehension axiom is true and that if P or Q then it is not the case that both not-P and not-Q. The content of both intuitions is general. Bealer, however, does not address the evidential weight of such general intuitions or the status of specific concrete case set-theoretic and logical intuitions. So it is not clear whether his comments about the

evidential weight of specific concrete case intuitions pertain only to classificatory intuitions and their role in conceptual analysis or whether they represent a general view about the evidential status of specific concrete case intuitions and general principles.

Although it is unclear whether Bealer's moderate rationalism is traditional or modern, I conclude by articulating three *prima facie* concerns with the latter view. First, an immediate consequence of modern moderate rationalism is that there is no basic a priori knowledge of general principles. Such knowledge is always inferential and based on abductive inference. Most proponents of the a priori, however, maintain that there is basic a priori knowledge of some general mathematical, logical, and synthetic a priori principles, such as that nothing is both red and green all over. Second, rationalists frequently contend that empiricist accounts of knowledge of elementary mathematical and logical principles are at odds with the fact that such principles are known with certainty, for the empiricist accounts maintain that knowledge of such principles is based on inductive inference. If that argument is cogent, then it applies with equal force to modern moderate rationalism. Third, since modern moderate rationalism maintains that knowledge of general principles is based on abductive inference, it faces the questions whether the principles that govern such inference are themselves general and, if so, whether it can provide a coherent account of knowledge of those principles.

2

Bealer offers three arguments in support of the contention that empiricism is incoherent. I consider only two of them since the third is directed at a narrow version of empiricism, inspired by Quine, which is widely rejected by contemporary proponents of the view.⁸ The first argument is the *Starting Points Argument*. Bealer employs the term "starting points" for basic epistemic classifications, such as what does and does not count as an experience, an observation, a theory, an explanation, and so on. The argument is straightforward:

8. Bealer's third argument is directed at a narrow version of empiricism that is committed to

- (Q) The simplest regimented formulation of the natural sciences contains no modal sentences or sentences to the effect that such and such is a definition, an analytic truth, or synonymous with so and so. (119)

Empiricism need not be committed to (Q). Moreover, (Q) is widely rejected by contemporary proponents of the view on the grounds that questions about the status of semantic concepts and their role in the formulation of the natural sciences are questions that are answered from within the sciences and not by philosophical argument.

- (SP1) According to empiricism, a person's evidence consists solely of that person's experiences and/or observations.
- (SP2) Empiricists use their intuitions as *prima facie* evidence in order to determine what does and does not count as experience, observation, theory, explanation, and so on.
- (SP3) Therefore, in actual practice, they are not faithful to their principles. (105)

The argument faces two problems. First, Bealer distinguishes between a priori and physical intuitions. The latter are compatible with empiricism; the former are not. Bealer, however, has not shown that the intuitions involved in classificatory judgments are a priori rather than physical. According to Bealer (100), if we consider a Gettier situation, we find it intuitively obvious that "in such a situation the person would not know that there is a sheep in the pasture." This description of the Gettier situation, taken at face value, does not involve an appearance of necessity. Instead, it indicates that when one considers a Gettier case, it seems to one that it is not a case of knowledge. Since Bealer has not shown that classificatory intuitions do, let alone must, involve an appearance of necessity, he has not shown that they are a priori intuitions. Second, suppose that we grant that such classificatory intuitions do involve an appearance of necessity. Both leading accounts of a priori justification maintain that intuitions are sources of a priori justification only if they are nonexperiential sources of justification. Bealer assumes that they are nonexperiential sources of justification solely in virtue of the fact that they involve an appearance of necessity. The fact that an intuition involves an appearance of necessity, however, provides little reason to believe that the underlying cognitive process that produces it does not involve experience. So unless Bealer can show that intuitions are nonexperiential sources of justification, empiricists can freely employ their intuitions without being open to the charge that they are unfaithful to their principles.

Bealer considers a response to the Starting Points Argument that contends that empiricists employ their intuitions as guides in formulating their theories but not as evidence. Bealer maintains (106–107) that such empiricists are faced with a dilemma:

- (SP4) Either intuitions regarding starting points are reliable or not.
- (SP5) If not, the error will be reflected in the theories based on them.
- (SP6) If so, then our intuitions about what counts as *prima facie* evidence are also reliable.
- (SP7) We have many concrete case intuitions that intuitions are *prima facie* evidence.
- (SP8) Therefore, intuitions are *prima facie* evidence and empiricism is false.

The argument is open to immediate objection. Bealer offers no evidence in support of (SP7). He maintains that it is a “plain truth” about our standard justificatory procedure that intuitions count as *prima facie* evidence (100). But, even if we concede this plain truth, it does not follow that we have intuitions that intuitions are *prima facie* evidence. Moreover, empiricists frequently deny (SP7). They maintain that they have a very different intuition with respect to intuition: it seems to them that intuition is “mysterious” rather than a source of *prima facie* evidence.⁹ The argument is also open to the two objections that were presented against the Starting Points Argument. First, even if we grant that we have concrete case intuitions that intuitions are *prima facie* evidence, Bealer has not shown that such intuitions involve an appearance of necessity. Second, even if we grant that the intuitions in question do involve an appearance of necessity, Bealer has provided no reason to believe that the cognitive processes that produce such intuitions do not involve experience.

3

Kornblith rejects the initial premise of the Starting Points Argument. He contends that empiricists need not deny that intuitions are evidence. In support of this contention, he contrasts two different views of the epistemic role of intuitions. On the traditional view, appeals to intuition reveal the essential features of our shared concepts. On the naturalistic view, our intuitions are triggered by obvious instances of the kind under investigation, which gives rise to the illusion that judgments based on them are *a priori*. Kornblith (2002, 13) contends, however, that such judgments, although obvious, are *a posteriori*:

9. Bealer considers a second response to the Starting Points Argument, which maintains that starting-point judgments are not determined by intuition but by some other mechanism. He rejects it by offering the following dilemma:

- (SP9) If our pretheoretic starting-point judgments are unreliable, then the resulting theory is unreliable.
- (SP10) If these judgments are reliable, then whatever makes them reliable should also make our pretheoretic judgments about what is and is not *prima facie* evidence reliable.
- (SP11) We have pretheoretic judgments to the effect that intuitions are *prima facie* evidence.
- (SP12) These pretheoretic judgments are reliable.
- (SP13) Therefore, intuitions are *prima facie* evidence. (107–108)

Just as empiricists deny (SP7), they would deny (SP11)—i.e., they would deny that they have pretheoretic judgments to the effect that intuitions are *prima facie* evidence.

These judgments are corrigible and theory-mediated. The extent of agreement among subjects on intuitive judgments is to be explained by common knowledge, or at least common belief, and the ways in which such background belief will inevitably influence intuitive judgment, although unavailable to introspection, are none the less quite real.

In short, Kornblith contends that intuitive judgments have two features that are incompatible with their being justified a priori: they are corrigible and influenced by background knowledge.

Kornblith's argument is inconclusive since the two features that he cites are in fact compatible with the a priori. A belief is corrigible, in the relevant sense, just in case it is subject to revision in light of new evidence. Assume that S's belief that p is justified by nonexperiential evidence. The fact that S's belief that p is subject to revision in light of further nonexperiential evidence does not show that it is justified a posteriori. For example, suppose that Frege's belief that the naive comprehension axiom is true was nonexperientially justified. The fact that he revised that belief in light of Russell's paradox does not show that his original justification for that belief was a posteriori. But what if S's belief that p is nonexperientially justified and revisable in light of experiential evidence? Is S's belief that p justified a posteriori? It is not if, as I maintain, (AP1) is the correct analysis of a priori justification. Hence, considerations about corrigibility cannot show that a belief is justified a posteriori.

The issue of background knowledge is more complex. Let us suppose that S's belief that p is justified by intuition, but that intuition is influenced by background knowledge in a manner that explains the agreement between S's intuitive judgments and those of others. Does it follow that S's belief that p is justified a posteriori? If the background knowledge that influences S's justification for the belief that p is nonexperiential, then the influence of such background knowledge provides no basis for concluding that S's belief that p is justified a posteriori. If, however, the relevant background knowledge is a posteriori, then it is plausible to maintain that S's belief that p is justified a posteriori. So influence by a posteriori background knowledge is incompatible with a priori justification.

The disagreement between Bealer and Kornblith on the epistemic status of intuitions turns on two questions:

- (Q1) Are intuitive judgments influenced by background knowledge?
- (Q2) Is that background knowledge a posteriori?

A vindication of Kornblith's position requires an affirmative answer to both questions. Kornblith rightly points out, with respect to (Q1), that Bealer cannot dismiss the role of background knowledge merely on the grounds that it is not

introspectively available. Introspection cannot reveal the nature of the cognitive processes that lead to intuitive judgments. Empirical investigation is necessary. But this observation cuts both ways. Kornblith cannot simply assert that background knowledge influences such judgments. Empirical evidence is necessary to substantiate this claim. Moreover, if background knowledge does influence such judgments, empirical investigation is also necessary to show that such knowledge is empirical.

4

Bealer's second argument is the *Argument from Epistemic Norms*. Consider visualism, which is the view that only visual experience provides prima facie evidence. Bealer maintains that we would not be justified in accepting this departure from the SJP. He poses (108) the question: How is empiricism relevantly different from views, such as visualism, that arbitrarily exclude evidence admitted by the SJP?

Bealer maintains that the empiricist can respond in one of two ways. The first is from within empiricism. Here the empiricist would attempt to show that the comprehensive theory that results from following the empiricist justificatory procedure sanctions itself as justified but rejects all other theories as unjustified. Bealer dismisses this response on the grounds that a competing theory, such as visualism, might yield a comprehensive theory that is self-approving in this sense. The result would be a stalemate between proponents of visualism and proponents of empiricism. Call this the *Stalemate Problem*.

In order to avoid the Stalemate Problem, the empiricist must respond in the second way, which is from within the SJP. Here the empiricist would employ the SJP's mechanism of self-criticism to show that one of its components is defective. The SJP offers two methods to challenge a candidate source of prima facie evidence. The first is to show that it fails to satisfy the three c's: consistency, corroboration, and confirmation. The empiricist cannot exploit the first method because, according to Bealer (109–110), specific concrete case intuitions pass all three tests. A person's intuitions are largely consistent with one another and corroborated by those of others.¹⁰ Moreover, our intuitions are rarely disconfirmed by our experiences, and many are affirmed by our empirical theories.

The SJP offers a second method for challenging a candidate source of prima facie evidence. Suppose, for example, that the pronouncements of a political authority have acquired the status of prima facie evidence and that they satisfy

10. Although Bealer acknowledges that there are apparent conflicts among one's intuitions and with those of others, he maintains that they can be reconciled by redescribing the intuitions using relevant distinctions or by describing cases more fully.

the three c's test. Bealer maintains that the political authority can be challenged as a source of *prima facie* evidence by showing that it fails the reliability test:

First, we should formulate the best overall theory based on all *other* sources of *prima facie* evidence. If this theory were not to deem the pronouncements of the political authority to be (largely) reliable, then we would be justified in rejecting the political authority as a special source of *prima facie* evidence. (115)

The reliability test, however, cannot always be used to challenge a candidate source of *prima facie* evidence. For example, a visualist could not use visual experience to legitimately challenge other modes of sense experience. What is the difference between the two cases? According to Bealer:

The political authority is *intuitively not as basic* a source of *prima facie* evidence as the sources of *prima facie* evidence that are being used to eliminate it (i.e., experience, observation, etc.). By contrast, vision and touch are *intuitively equally basic* sources of *prima facie* evidence. The standard justificatory procedure permits us to apply the present method against a currently accepted source of *prima facie* evidence if and only if *intuitively* that source is not as basic as the sources of *prima facie* evidence being used to challenge it. (115–116)

Bealer (117), however maintains: “Intuitively, . . . intuitions are evidentially as basic as a person’s experiences.” Therefore, the empiricist cannot invoke the reliability test to challenge intuition as a source of *prima facie* evidence, and intuition survives the SJP’s method of self-criticism.¹¹ The upshot is that there is no relevant difference between visualism, which arbitrarily excludes touch as a source of *prima facie* evidence, and empiricism, which excludes intuition as a source of *prima facie* evidence.

Bealer maintains that the empiricist cannot explain how empiricism differs from other views, such as visualism, that arbitrarily exclude standard sources of *prima facie* evidence. The SJP, however, faces an analogous problem: it cannot

11. Bealer’s account of our standard justificatory procedure is at odds with actual epistemic practice. We have available on the contemporary epistemological scene one example of a controversy over whether an alleged source of evidence is basic—namely, testimony. The typical defenses of testimony as a basic source involve considerations such as (1) analogies between testimony and other undisputed basic sources such as perception; (2) the view that testimony is a nonbasic source of evidence cannot accommodate intuitively plausible cases of testimonial evidence, such as children relying on the testimony of their parents or adults relying on the testimony of strangers; and (3) any attempt to certify the credentials of testimony as a nonbasic source of evidence is ultimately circular and leads to skepticism. No one appeals to the intuition that testimony is a basic source of evidence.

explain how it differs from views that arbitrarily introduce nonstandard sources of prima facie evidence. Bealer's case of the political authority can be easily transformed into one in which the political authority is recognized as a legitimate source of prima facie evidence by the SJP. We need only add to his description of the case that those who hold the political authority to be a source of prima facie evidence also have the intuition that the political authority is as basic a source of evidence as those being used to challenge it.¹² Given this modification, the reliability test cannot be used against the political authority; the political authority survives the SJP's mechanism of self-criticism. The result is a stalemate between proponents and opponents of the political authority as a basic source of evidence. Those who have the intuition that the political authority is not as basic a source of evidence as those being used to challenge it can employ the SJP's method of self-criticism to reject the political authority as a source of prima facie evidence. Those who lack such an intuition cannot employ the SJP's method of self-criticism to reject the political authority as a source of prima facie evidence.

Where does this leave us? Bealer maintains that the empiricist cannot explain how empiricism is relevantly different from views that arbitrarily exclude basic sources of evidence admitted by the SJP. An explanation from within empiricism fails because it leads to the Stalemate Problem. Visualism might yield a comprehensive theory that is self-approving. The SJP is faced with an analogous problem. It cannot explain how the SJP is relevantly different from views that arbitrarily introduce basic sources of evidence not admitted by the SJP. An explanation from within the SJP fails because it leads to the Stalemate Problem.¹³ The pronouncements

12. Alternatively, we could add that they lack the intuition that the political authority is not as basic a source of evidence as those being used to challenge it.

13. The Stalemate Problem also arises with respect to Bealer's defense of the claim that intuition satisfies the three c's test. Although Bealer acknowledges that one's own intuitions are sometimes inconsistent with one another and with those of others, he maintains that such conflicts can be dissolved by redescribing the intuitions using relevant distinctions. So, to take one example pertinent to the present discussion, if some empiricist has the intuition that defeasibility by experience is incompatible with a priori justification and some rationalist has the intuition that defeasibility by experience is compatible with a priori justification, the conflict can be dissolved by distinguishing two senses of a priori justification: a strong sense, which requires indefeasibility by experience, and a weak sense, which does not. The apparent conflict of intuitions is dissolved because the empiricist's intuition is that defeasibility by experience is incompatible with the *strong* sense of a priori justification but the rationalist's intuition is that defeasibility by experience is compatible with the *weak* sense of a priori justification. When properly described, the two intuitions do not conflict. But the reconciliation also leads to the Stalemate Problem. Assume that the leading examples of beliefs alleged to be justified a priori are in fact nonexperientially justified but defeasible by experience. If the empiricist denies that such propositions are justified a priori and the rationalist affirms that they are justified a priori, both are correct. The result is a stalemate over the existence of a priori knowledge.

of the political authority might survive the SJP's method of self-criticism. Hence, empiricism fares no worse than rationalism in terms of defending its epistemic norms.¹⁴

5

Bealer's defense of rationalism is unsatisfying since it is no better than the defense that he acknowledges the empiricist can offer on behalf of empiricism. Both lead to the Stalemate Problem. The source of the shortcoming in Bealer's defense is that it exemplifies two characteristic features of most defenses of rationalism: it attempts to show, primarily on a priori grounds, that empiricism is deficient in some respect. Such defenses are both ineffective and misguided. They are ineffective since they typically lead to an impasse, where proponents of each position list the deficiencies of the opposing position and claim that those facing the opponent are greater than those it faces. They are misguided since no evidence to the effect that one theory does not provide an adequate account of some domain of knowledge can show that an opposing theory does provide an adequate account of such knowledge. Remedying these shortcomings requires a fundamentally different approach to defending rationalism. It requires offering evidence in support of rationalism that is compelling to both rationalists and empiricists.

A case that is compelling to both parties must be based on common ground. In order to identify common ground, one must be clear about the parameters of the controversy between rationalists and empiricists. In particular, one must be clear about points of agreement as well as points of disagreement. Empiricists are not skeptics in the traditional sense. Rationalists typically maintain that logic, mathematics, and alleged synthetic a priori truths, such as that whatever is red is colored, provide the leading examples of a priori knowledge. Empiricists, unlike skeptics, do not deny that we have such knowledge. Their disagreement with rationalists is over the source of such knowledge. Empiricists, on the other hand, place an exclusive premium on empirical knowledge and, in particular, on the methods and results of the sciences. Rationalists, however, do not deny that we have scientific knowledge. Their disagreement with empiricists is over the claim that such knowledge is justified exclusively by experience. They insist that scientific theories involve elements, such as mathematical and logical principles, that are not so justified. Hence, the fundamental disagreement between rationalists and empiricists is not over the *scope* of human knowledge. There are broad

14. The Argument from Epistemic Norms is open to a further problem. An empiricist who lacks the intuition that intuitions are evidentially as basic as experiences can employ the SJP's mechanism of self-correction to legitimately challenge intuition as a source of *prima facie* evidence.

areas, including mathematics, logic, and the sciences, where both agree that we have knowledge. Their disagreement is over the *source* of that knowledge. Rationalists, such as Bealer, have not fully exploited this common ground. Rather than relying exclusively on a priori arguments against empiricism, rationalists should enlist empirical support for the existence of a priori knowledge.

What empirical evidence is relevant to establishing the existence of a priori knowledge? The shortcomings of Bealer's arguments highlight five areas where such evidence is relevant. Bealer's case for the existence of the a priori, based on the evidential status of intuitions, fails because he does not show that intuitions are nonexperiential sources of evidence. Bealer characterizes intuitions solely on the basis of their phenomenological features. In order to establish that intuitions are nonexperiential sources of evidence, two questions must be addressed. First, what cognitive process or cognitive processes produce intuitions? Second, does experience play a relevant role in the production of intuitions? Empirical evidence is relevant to answering both questions. Bealer offers two tests for adjudicating disputes about sources of evidence: the three c's test and the reliability test. Establishing that intuition satisfies these tests requires answering three questions. First, what is the extent of (genuine) conflicts among the intuitions of individual cognizers and among those of different cognizers? Second, is intuition a reliable source? Third, is there an explanation of the reliability of intuition? Once again, empirical evidence is relevant to answering these questions.

A case built on empirical evidence that establishes that (a) experience does not play a relevant role in the production of intuitions; (b) intuition satisfies the three c's; (c) intuitions are a reliable source of belief formation; and (d) there is an explanation of that reliability is one that both rationalists and empiricists would find compelling in light of their own respective epistemic commitments. It avoids the Stalemate Problem and the impasse generated by negative a priori arguments. Hence, there is much to recommend this approach to defending the a priori.¹⁵

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